

Critical Citizen Engagement: The Black Pete Controversy, Anti-Racism Activism, and Limits to Citizenship in The Netherlands

Background

This research analyses the engagement of Dutch citizens with a migration background in anti-racism activism, specifically activism against the blackface caricature Black Pete. It aims to answer how and why their citizenship is questioned when they become critical participants of civil society, and how this relates to the history of Dutch colonialism, the denial of racism, and the self-image of white Dutch people as ‘good, tolerant, and innocent’ despite evidence to the contrary.

Methods

The research is based on literature and field research and uses a theoretical framework based on critical race theory, citizenship studies, and decolonial theory.

Results

By contextualizing the Black Pete caricature in the history of slavery, colonialism, and the white Dutch self-image of innocence, the background is provided for the anti-Black Pete activism by Dutch citizens of migrant backgrounds. It shows how mainstream society and state forces react to critical engagement with Dutch cultural elements by Dutch citizens of colour, and explains the rise of a small number of politicians of migration backgrounds who speak out against institutionalized racism in a country that prides itself on its supposed ‘tolerance’.

Discussion & Reflection

I use different citizenship and decolonial theories and concepts to analyse the vicious racism and limits to citizenship Dutch citizens with a migrant background experience when they use their constitutional and democratic rights.

Interdisciplinary reflection

The study advances the sociology, social inequality, and citizenship literature by analysing a pressing national controversy in the Netherlands surrounding Black Pete, institutionalized racism, citizenship and social justice.

Keywords: Migrant Engagement; Black Pete; Anti-Racism Activism; Citizenship; The Netherlands.



Figure 1: Welcoming parade of Sinterklaas and his Black Petes in a Dutch city. Source: <http://stopblackface.com/het-ontmantelen-van-koloniale-machtsstructuren-geen-piet/>

There are no conflicts of interest.